

Pointers to make this your most productive grazing season ever

More milk from grass

For some producers summer routine means more of the same with the whole herd being fully housed. Others will opt to graze during the day. Many, however, will either have opened the doors fully for all or at least a proportion of the herd.

text Allison Matthews

And for these producers, optimising the intake of high quality grazed grass, the cheapest feed available, should be a priority.

"Although grazed grass has the potential to support daily milk yields of between 25 and 28 litres per cow in April and May, many herds struggle to achieve anything close to this level of performance from grazed grass," says the AgriFood and Biosciences Institute's Andrew Dale. "Grazing management and appropriate concentrate supplementation are the two key factors in improving summer performance.

"And, although it is impossible to say if 2010 will be a good 'grazing' year this early on, experience shows that poor grazing management at this stage could adversely impact on herbage quality as the grazing season progresses."

He adds that there are a number of key targets that should be kept in mind as another grazing season begins.

First rotation

"A key grassland target is to have the core grazing area grazed by mid- to late-April. This is necessary to prepare for the second rotation, as it is critical to set up the grazing area in a wedge and avoid having too many fields at the optimal stage for grazing all at the same time.

"Failing to finish the first rotation on target will mean that, as grass growth hits its annual peak, it will be difficult to achieve target pre-grazing and post-grazing grass covers. Grazing high covers of poor quality grass in early May will compromise herbage quality into mid- and late-season," explains Dr Dale.

Setting targets for grazing covers is also



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an essential part of grazing management that will reap dividends as the season progresses," according to Thompson's Richard Moore.

"The target should be to graze the sward when the grass yield is between 3,000kg and 3,300kgDM/ha – 12 to 14cm high – or whenever it comes a third of the way up your Wellington boot.

"To meet this target, a rotation length of between 18 and 21 days will normally be required during the period of peak growth in early May.

"The cows should also be achieving a post-grazing cover of between 1,600kg and 1,800kgDM/ha – that's a sward height of 4-5cm," says Mr Moore.

If these targets are achieved the sward being grazed will be mainly leaf, with

little stem, and post-grazing the sward is likely to be 'greener' at the base, allowing for a quick regrowth.

"This is the material we want to be feeding our cows – high quality, high protein grass, with an ME of around 12, that will drive cost effective performance," he adds.

Stocking rate

Establishing stocking rate targets is an essential component of managing grass, and calculating the area required for cows from now until first-cut aftermaths are available for grazing in June is vital.

"The optimum stocking rate for this period is influenced by the stage of lactation, meal feeding and potential grass growth," says Dr Dale.

"Although five cows/ha may be the target on many farms, stocking rates may be increased to six or seven cows/ha when concentrate feed levels are between 4kg and 8kg/cow/day – or when additional silage is being fed.

"Failing to reduce the grazing area

Richard Moore



in situations where high levels of supplements are being fed will ultimately result in an oversupply of grass, and make managing the grazing area very difficult," he warns.

Maintaining an awareness of grass growth is critical, particularly in early season, as this allows timely and confident grassland management decisions to be made. This is best achieved by regularly walking all the grazing paddocks, and producing a 'grass wedge.' Alternatively, regional grass growth patterns are now produced by a number of projects across the UK.

React quickly

"Regardless of how growth rates are monitored, it is important to react quickly to a potential surplus or deficit in grass supply. Ideally surplus paddocks should be cut immediately to maintain their position in the grazing cycle. "However, delaying cutting could cause the paddock to fall out of 'sequence', and as recovery will be much slower following the harvest of a heavier crop of grass, the surplus situation could easily become a deficit in the next rotation," says Dr Dale.

"The high quality grass that will be both grown and made available to the dairy cow in following these guidelines will, of course, be a key component of the diet.

"But maintaining and driving production from cows, particularly in early- and mid-lactation, will require thought into appropriate supplementation of the correct concentrate," adds Mr Moore.

"If you run a high yielding herd with early lactation cows giving more than 40 litres of milk then you have probably already made the decision to not give these cows 24-hour access to grass.

"With ideal weather conditions, these animals will perform on between 10 and 12kg of concentrate. But when it rains and then rains some more, as it will, these animals will suffer," he says,

"It's then best to house these animals until they're past peak lactation and graze the mid-to-late-lactation, lower risk animals.

Lower expectations

Many units will be turning out cows with lower yield expectations. "Most fresh-calved animals on these units will be yielding between 35 and 40 litres and so long as these cows are offered full feed rate (up to 10kg) in the parlour of a high energy, high digestible fibre concentrate they will perform well at grass even in poorer conditions," says Mr Moore.

"The trap to avoid on this system is the perceived need to house all the cows at night or buffer feed all the cows just to safeguard the performance of the few animals producing more than 40 litres.

"This is the scenario when costs are significantly increased just to protect those few litres in every bulk tank and should be avoided," he says.

"Pushing these animals to between 11 and 12kg of concentrate in the parlour and continuing to exploit the value of grass is by far the better option." |

Monitor grass growth rates and react quickly to any potential surplus or deficit in grazing

